

Define: Self

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

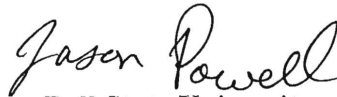
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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jason Powell". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Jason" and last name "Powell" clearly distinguishable.

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Abstract

Who are you? The “self” is a philosophical construct that many people do not understand. Often, people use stereotypical markers, such as their name, age, gender, hobbies, religion, etc. However, we determined that these markers were unacceptable components of the self, as these typical markers can be stripped away and are, thus, a representation of the self, not its definition. To replace the current system of defining one’s self, we developed a system that explains the self’s composition in terms of “qualities,” such as humor, bitterness, anger, joy, etc. To determine if people could look at their selves through these terms, we asked our peers to define their selves without the traditional markers. The results were varied, and the question posed great difficulty, as it asked the individual to dig deep within his or her self to find the answers he or she may not have wanted to find. However, through the challenges we created, a better understanding of the self emerged.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our thesis advisor and Honors professor, Dr. Jason Powell, for encouraging us to think deeply about the self and helping us transform a class project into a worthy Honors thesis. We would also like to thank each individual who took the time to respond to our prompt; without their input, this project would not have been possible. Last but not least, we appreciate the feedback and ideas received from friends and family on the subject of the self.

Table of Contents

Author’s Statement.....3

Introduction.....4

What Defines the Self?.....4

The Question: Who Are You?..... 6

Interpreting the Responses.....6

Religion.....8

Gender.....10

Place and Culture.....12

NCHC Conference in New Orleans..... 14

Conclusion..... 15

References.....17

Appendix A: Project Sheet.....18

Appendix B: Responses.....19

Appendix C: NCHC Presentation Board.....97

Author's Statement

This Honors thesis project investigates the nature of the self. Often, stereotypical markers, such as race, religion, political party, etc., describe the self. However, this project, using journalistic inquiry and creative thinking, strives to prove that the self is actually composed of deeper qualities. This project began as a classroom assignment on the modern self. I completed the assignment and the extended thesis with Samantha “Mandy” Dyer. My role in this project included:

- analyzing the responses,
- writing the abstract and the sections entitled “The Question,” “Interpreting the Responses,” “Religion,” and “NCHC Conference in New Orleans,”
- co-writing the sections entitled “Introduction,” “What Defines the Self?,” and “Conclusion,”
- editing the entire thesis,
- collaborating on the artistic direction of the accompanying poster,
- and co-presenting the thesis at the National Collegiate Honors Council Conference on November 8, 2013.

Introduction

The most complicated entity in the world is the self. Benjamin Franklin once said, “There are three things extremely hard: steel, a diamond, and to know one’s self.” People often misunderstand what truly composes the self. Many times, people believe that the outward, traditional markers, such as one’s name, age, gender, hobbies, religion, etc., define the self. However, their interpretation is not accurate. In this paper, we contend that the typical markers, such as the ones mentioned above, are a representation or expression of the self, not the definition of one’s self. We will defend our thesis by explaining the actual components of the self, how these components are then expressed through the outward markers, and the results from our journalistic questioning on the topic.

This project came about after one of our Honors classes required us to produce a creative project focused on any aspect of the modern self. One late night, we sat at our kitchen table trying to figure out what to do for this project, on which we had procrastinated for way too long. As we continued to discuss the self, we realized we were not even sure we could define it. We thought of many things, such as gender, race, etc., but none of the stereotypical markers seemed to define what actually composes a self. We determined that even if those markers were removed, a self still existed. Then came the idea that there was something greater of which the self was composed, but we were not sure if people could truly separate from the markers and define it for themselves. Because we wanted to see if it was possible for other individuals to define their selves with the belief system we created (which will be described below), we developed the project that has now become the basis for this thesis. We were not quite sure what we would find, but we hoped that any result would help to develop further the concept of the self that we had created.

What Defines the Self?

In essence, the self is composed of a set of qualities, which resemble the characteristics of a personality. These qualities are possibly innumerable but are represented as traits, such as

kindness, sadness, anger, bitterness, humor, compassion, rage, hope, etc. Each quality is pure in nature, being the highest form of the essence possible. There is a certain amount of each quality in a given self. The amount of each quality is the quality's quantitative value. The quantitative values for each individual quality can then be added together to create the overall self. The self will then reflect the characteristics of which it is composed. For example, a person whose self has high quantitative values in the qualities of bitterness, anger, and hatred will have an ugly self. In contrast, a person with high quantitative values in the qualities of compassion, hope, and kindness will have a beautiful self.

As mentioned previously, people often misinterpret the outward expressions of the self as the definitions of their selves. Age, gender, hobbies, religion, political party, sexual preference, college, career, inhabitation, etc. are important expressions of the self, but they do not make a person. For example, a person is not the number twenty-one, even if that is his or her age. The age is only a representation of the twenty-one years of experience and growth the self has made. For another example, a person is not born a Republican. Being Republican is a result of the experiences and personal interpretation of the world as understood by the self. Thus, these markers cannot be definitions themselves, as the self determines how a person interprets and expresses his or her experiences. Since the self is composed of qualities, the values of the qualities are the determining factors in the way in which a person chooses to express his or her self.

Opponents of our theory may argue that people's hobbies, inhabitation, political persuasion, career, etc. often change drastically throughout a lifetime, and that individuals may not change as drastically as their interests. However, this is false. The self is an ever-evolving being. As Wilhelm Dilthey's idea of the Hermeneutical Circle theory explains, new experiences and other people in the world are constantly impacting the self. Even the smallest event can make a difference in the course of a life. In reference to our argument, the response to these daily impacts changes the quantitative values of the self's qualities. When the amounts of the qualities change, the outward expressions of the self also change. While some impacts on the self may be

small, others may be quite large, depending upon the magnitude of the change from the original quantitative value to the current. One of the greatest examples of this concept in today's society can be seen in the "mid-life crisis." When a middle-aged individual begins to experience the onset of old age, such as having an empty nest or losing the once-perfect figure, the desire to revert back to his or her younger age causes a shift in the quantities of the qualities. Spontaneity and light-heartedness may rise in value, while responsibility and caution may decrease. While the overall self may still reflect a similar individual after an experience, likely due to the same qualities still being present or most prominent, a change in the quantitative values causes change in the expressions of the self.

The Question: Who Are You?

To see if people could describe their selves in terms of the quality system we created, we posed the question, "Who are you?" to our fellow students and professors. We created a project explanation sheet and distributed it to our interviewees. See Appendix A: Project Sheet for the original question. We requested that they answer the question above in any medium or manner that suited them, but they could not use markers such as name, age, gender, career, hobbies, religion, political party, or any other traditional signifier in their responses. By removing the markers, we hoped to see individuals describe themselves using the quality system.

Interpreting the Responses

On the whole, we received a variety of responses to our question. See Appendix B: Responses for the full collection of responses. The majority of respondents gave written answers, which ranged drastically in both length and approach. Some people used only a few words to describe themselves; others required several sentences or paragraphs. A large number of respondents also chose to use artistic mediums, such as dance, drawing, painting, collage, etc. These artworks were beautiful, unpleasant, provoking, and relatable. Some of the works were professional quality, while others were amateurish. Regardless of the chosen approach,

most responses appeared very personal and thoughtful. There were many participants that were able to look deep within themselves and separate their true selves from their external markers. However, those who struggled to perform the task had indicators of typical markers within their responses. This may have been due to the fact that influencing experiences in these related areas have helped to define their selves; however, we were looking for the result of the impact, not the impact itself.

As stated above, the process of defining one's self is a difficult task, and asking people to do so without the use of stereotypical markers proved to be an almost impossible task for some individuals. In fact, many of the individuals we asked included how difficult the undertaking was in their response. One individual stated, "[The question] is so powerful that with its presentation to me, it has managed to make me writhe like an ant who has been semi-squished and yet desperately works to flee the scene," while another said, "To be honest, this assignment was neither easy nor enjoyable for me to write. Examining my inner self forced me to dive into the deeper parts of myself and locate my true identity." Many reasons contribute to the difficulty this task produces. The most prominent reason is the nature of the task itself. Forcing one to throw away the things that one identifies with and instead look for the things that compose the self is difficult because it calls for an introspective look at the self, which many people do not like to do. The theory of the self we have developed has likely produced difficulty because an outward expression is more visible than the inward truth; what is visible is easier to understand, and it is human nature to choose the easier option. In addition, today's American society tends to shy away from too much reality. If one were to see what truly composes his or her self, he or she may not be pleased with what lies there. The idea that one's self is not perfect and needs to change is a hard reality to face and one that many people fear. In most cases, ignorance is bliss. Therefore, the concept of the self we present addresses this difficult and feared view of the self head-on.

The age of those interviewed likely contributed to the struggle of this task as well. Although no statistical data was requested or analyzed, it can be assumed that most of the respondents were college students, meaning they were likely in their late teens or early twenties.

They are at the beginning of their lives, figuring out who they were, are, and will become. Although the self is in constant evolution, this stage of life is one in which big changes occur. Twenty-something individuals often have enough experiences to have begun to change from children to adults, but are still developing the self they want to be. Compounding the natural evolution of the self that accompanies many in this age group is the constant force of education on the individuals and their belief systems. College often broadens one's scope of the world and changes, adjusts, or more firmly cements the quantitative values of the qualities the individual once held. Therefore, it is understandable that so many of our respondents were incapable or legitimately struggled to define their selves during this evolutionary time in their lives.

Although we allowed individuals to answer the question in any format they desired, the ability of people to put their thoughts into words provided a challenge for some respondents. While the number of words humans can create is limitless, the use of verbal language can in fact be limiting. There are some aspects or features of life that words cannot express, and the nature of the self proved to be a feature that most people struggled to put into words. The use of other artistic mediums, such as dance, photography, collaging, drawing, etc., were utilized, probably because of those art forms' abilities to express what words cannot. These mediums have less natural restrictions upon them and provide an easier outlet for expressions of the self.

Religion

A significant number of responses revealed many peoples' insistence on linking their identity with religious affiliation, particularly Christianity. Many respondents included some form of their connection to any part of the Trinity, typically by stating they were followers of Jesus Christ. For example, one individual stated, "I am God's. This is who I am.... Being God's is a glorious thing and my source of joy and motivation to live everyday." Initially, responses such as this seemed to be a deliberate disregard for the prompt. However, after further thought, the problem these individuals had might actually be in the question they answered. Instead of describing who they were, they explained why they were the people they claimed to be. Asking

individuals who identify with religion to define who they were without addressing their faith essentially removed their purpose as well, their purpose being Christ. Because Christ is tied so closely to the essence of their beings, they could not understand wholly their selves without their purpose.

One might question how religious affiliation is interpreted through the quality system. Religion is often a strong stereotypical marker for individuals, and one that has proved difficult from which to stray. Religious markers are almost always accompanied with intense passion and beliefs on the way in which a person lives life. However, religion is an entity in itself. One cannot be the entity because he or she has been created outside of it and of God himself; however, he or she can emulate the characteristics and/or qualities that the religion supports. For example, Christianity values forgiveness, no matter the trespass. Thus, an individual who identifies his or her self as a Christian should have higher quantitative values in the quality of forgiveness than an individual who is not Christian.

Also, most religions have a leader, popular figures, or a founder of whom followers emulate. These figures have their own quantitative values in specific qualities. To follow the leader's teachings, a follower must attempt to change his or her self, through changes in the quantitative values, so that his or her values are at the same quantitative levels of the leader's. Christians follow Jesus Christ, and are, thus, supposed to attempt to modify their quantities' levels in a way that will imitate him and allow for an easier following of his teachings.

This interpretation of religious affiliation provides individuals with a challenging issue. When one sees religion as an entity of an exemplar set of qualities with specific quantitative values instead of as a label, the question arises: are one's own quantitative values for the specified qualities at the levels of those of the religion and religious figures? The belief system becomes less blinded by the title alone, and forces an individual to evaluate his or her spiritual self. In addition, if one believes God creates human beings, God creates every person differently. If every individual is thus uniquely special, wouldn't a person want to know who he or she is to understand better who God wants that person to be? Knowing who one is, excluding the religious

marker, actually helps one to understand better God and his creations. This method of viewing religion through qualities actually allows for better understanding of one's chosen faith and the impact faith has on the self in general.

Gender

While religious markers were clearly conspicuous within the responses, the appearance of gender was subtle, yet observable. Individuals used terms, such as “girl,” “man,” “father,” and “brother,” that distinctly indicated a specific sex. In addition, when respondents used mediums that included imagery, some individuals depicted aspects of the self with images of either males or females. In contrast to the use of religious markers, it is probable that the uses of gender within the responses were actually the result of automatic, unconscious writing or artistic interpretation. Regardless of the medium, the responses in which gender can be seen did not seem to be proclaiming gender to be a defining characteristic of the self; rather the respondents merely used the gender-specific terms or images.

Because gender appeared so nonchalantly within the responses, a look at gender in terms of the quality system proved necessary. Among other markers, gender may partially shape the self, but it does not determine the self. Being a man, woman, or transgender has specific implications for a person's identity, because one might argue that certain aspects of a self are tied to this gender distinction. For example, being a man might imply certain likes or dislikes, certain proficiencies, and even a level of emotional capacity. After all, most men seem less emotional than women. However, these are merely stereotypes. For example, fifty years ago, fewer women worked out of the home compared to recent years, but arguably no one can prove that men or women are more or less suited to the professional world or child-rearing. It is not uncommon to know a “stay-at-home dad” with a working mom, although this was unheard of many years ago. The genetic makeup of each gender has not changed in fifty years; only the perception of what is “appropriate” for each sex has changed. This is the basis of the argument that gender does not truly determine a person's self. While being a certain gender might imply certain aspects about a

person, stereotypes are often disproved.

To be more accurate, one can delve into what motivates a person either to follow or to ignore gender stereotypes. A woman that enjoys traditional male activities certainly has underlying motivations for her behavior. Perhaps the activity itself is more enjoyable than traditional female activities. Maybe she is adventurous and likes pushing normative boundaries; this could apply far beyond her interest in male activities. Perhaps she actually identifies more with a man than a woman; in this case, labeling her self as a woman would be counterproductive. It is far more accurate to look deeper than the labels of “man,” “woman,” and “transgender” and determine the true qualities of the self, which then determine whether this person fits the stereotypical roles or descriptions of his or her gender.

On a similar note, sexual orientation also does not define one’s self. Arguably, it may heavily influence one’s decisions, interests, friends, beliefs, etc. In addition, it is important to consider a modern debate about sexuality and the self. Some people believe that sexual orientation is a learned behavior, while others believe that it is genetic and cannot be changed with teachings or experiences. Regardless of which side of the argument is correct, the self is ever-evolving and may be influenced by teachings or may have intrinsic values from birth. What is more important is not the actual sexual orientation of a person, but the kind of person underlying this sexuality. A homosexual man or woman might have qualities of kindness and generosity. Another homosexual individual might possess a very different self: rude and selfish. If sexual orientation truly defines a person, one might argue that these two individuals would have similar identities, but in reality, they are quite different. For each person, the qualities of the self might not have been shaped by their sexuality. Thus, it follows that one must look deeper than labels of sexual orientation to determine the true aspects of the self. Although aspects of sexual orientation did not occur in the responses, it would be neglectful not to approach the subject when discussing gender and the self.

Place and Culture

While religion and gender are relatively difficult to separate from one's conception of the self, the influence of place and culture on the self was not nearly as evident in the responses received. Ordinarily, place and culture have a large impact on the evolution of the self. Unique but connected, places are socially constructed settings in which humans carry out their daily lives. "Socially constructed" simply means that people make or shape places. Places include cities or towns, or for the purpose of this project, any smaller or larger setting with which a person identifies. Culture evokes much broader and complex conceptual ideas; however, one might refer to culture as the beliefs or values people hold, the norms or rules people follow, and the material objects people create and use that reflect their values and norms.

With these definitions in mind, one must understand the dynamic interplay between one's identity and his or her place. Soja (1980) uses the term "socio-spatial dialectic" to describe the mutually interacting process whereby people shape or make places in which they live and at the same time, they are influenced or partially shaped by these places. The second part of the socio-spatial dialectic, the idea that places partially shape people, most applies to this creative project.

The respondents gave no obvious sign of influence of place or setting, mostly because the prompt attempted to remove all indications of outside influence on the self. Removing hobbies, careers, and of course, the place of origin or hometown effectively removes these obvious influences of place on the self. Stripping away political and religious markers, to a point, also removes some of the cultural influences on the self. However, in spite of removing these markers, there was very subtle evidence of the influence of place on the self in the responses. Culture is not directly tied to place, but place is built from cultural norms and values. When one is influenced by dominant cultural norms and values, one is indirectly influenced by the structures of place. Even without religious or political markers, vague cultural values and norms may have been present in many responses, particularly in the way respondents discussed what was important to them and the descriptions of the ways they choose to interact with others. One respondent discussed the concept of justice as being essential to his or her self; many others

discussed faith as a core component of their selves. In addition, the influence of culture was partially seen in the more abstract and visual representations of the self – artwork, photographs, dances, songs, etc. These responses relate more to the material side of culture but nevertheless could give an indication of cultural influence on the self.

More importantly, without the use of markers, it is almost impossible to attribute these qualities of the self to cultural influence. It would require an expert on cultural studies to look through the responses and understand the cultural processes and influences at work. Even so, one cannot prove that these qualities are directly tied to cultural or spatial influence. Without markers, these influences appear vague and can apply to many cultures. Perhaps when markers of place or culture are stripped away, more universal qualities of the self can emerge, qualities that can cross ethnical or even national boundaries. We suggest that a universal conception of the self might exist, regardless of one's background.

It is worth noting, however, that the respondents used in this project were not particularly diverse in terms of culture or nationality. As stated previously, although we did not request statistical data on the respondents, most were students in the Ball State University Honors College, in their late teens or early twenties, primarily Caucasian, and primarily “American” in upbringing. Most of these students were facing the issues and daily events typical to that of the young Western college student: issues of personal change, balancing studies, and daunting questions of the future. That said, the responses had similar themes but were somehow quite diverse. This is not to say that the type of group surveyed directly correlates with the type of responses. One might assume that a more diverse group – varying ages, cultures, backgrounds, levels of schooling, nationality, language, etc. – would produce different results. Especially for those of different nationalities or cultures, different value systems and norms might emerge in the responses. However, the self is so complex and ever-changing that to assume a direct correlation of one's cultural influence and one's self would be a fallacy. An endless variety of influences may impact the qualities of the self.

NCHC Conference in New Orleans

We were given the opportunity to present our thesis as a poster presentation at the National Collegiate Honors Council Conference in New Orleans on November 8, 2013. I had been dreading the presentation due to a fear of how it would be received. The self is an entity that is not only hard to understand and explain, but one that many people avoid discussing. However, my fears were unnecessary, as there were people constantly at our poster during the two-hour presentation. Many people appeared very interested in the topic, with one group staying for almost twenty minutes to question us on the material. We also received much praise on the novelty of our concept and the analysis we had done. On two occasions, we were even asked if we were sociology majors, which was a high compliment as neither of us has any substantial background in sociology. I am a speech pathology major, and Mandy is an urban planning major.

Although we received much praise, one persistent professor from an attending university heavily questioned our presentation. He tried to attack our concept of the self using psychological interpretations of the self. He even tried to go as far as to say the self potentially did not exist. After he concluded the discussion on his beliefs, he questioned us on whether we still believed a self existed, and if we did, what we thought composed it. In truth, this gentleman intimidated me, and I was not sure if we would be able to defend ourselves against him. However, I ultimately stood my ground, and stated, "Sir, we do believe a self exists. In all honesty, we can't stand here and say that we know exactly what the self is. However, I think after this project, we now know what it's not." The answer seemed to suffice for him, and I celebrated inwardly at the accomplishment.

Although the professor appeared to be the one true opponent of our concept at the conference, the experience with him led to greater understanding of the purpose and results of our project. For so long, I had been focused on the concept of the self we had created. However, the encounter reminded me that one can never truly know, with certainty, what composes the self. One can only continue to search for a better understanding of the self. This project, as I stated to the gentleman, thus helped us in determining what the self is not, which ultimately allowed us to

come closer to what it is through the system we developed.

The concept of the self actually came up earlier in the conference. In addition to the poster presentation, we had the pleasure of listening to Ruby Bridges Hall discuss her experiences as one of the first African American children to be integrated into an all-white school in New Orleans. After her presentation, she allowed the audience to ask questions. One individual asked for one piece of advice Mrs. Hall could give someone in their twenties. She responded by saying, “Know your self” (R. Hall, presentation, November 7, 2013). I found this response to be one of the wisest parts of her presentation.

Understanding the self and learning about the qualities that compose it can help individuals learn to value themselves and use the qualities they have to make change in society. Through understanding the self, one can begin to understand better his or her place and purpose in this world. Ruby Bridges Hall is someone who has been through so much in her lifetime. She knows her self and travels around the country helping children develop their selves as well. Through individuals such as her and projects such as this, understanding the self is becoming more important, not only to one’s own being, but to bettering society.

Conclusion

The self, whether one is able to identify some of its qualities or not, is likely an entity that may never be understood. However, attempting to understand the self results in a process that ultimately benefits the individual, as truth of self has potential to lead to a transformation toward beauty. Many people try to understand the self by looking at the outward markers, but these markers are only the representations of the inward qualities of which the self is composed. As these qualities change, the outward markers change. People typically do not try to look past the markers, as truth about the self takes time to understand and manage. Thus, our simple question allowed people the opportunity to begin to understand the qualities that define them. While the project did present challenges for many people, after some time and deep thought, many people were able to define who they were within the new system we created. Although we cannot

definitively define the self, we believe, through understanding what it is not, we have a better understanding of what it is. Therefore, time, effort, and introspection of the qualities of the self can lead to a successful beginning in truly understanding the self.

References

Soja, E. W. (1980). The socio-spatial dialectic. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 70(2), 207-225. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2562950>